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CHAPTER XLV

Lincoln and the Common Soldier

In following Mr. Lincoln's footsteps as President, we have had various proofs of his ability to handle the men associated with him in responsibility. He certainly showed a high order of intelligence in his relations with Seward, Chase, McClellan, Frémont and many others - a high order of intelligence and a fine patience in dealing with them as well as a humor and an adroitness most unusual in men of power. But we have paid little attention to his understanding of crowds - people in masses. Yet, no little of his strength came from his understanding of the emotions and convictions which sway American groups and his faith that, given time, their judgments are sound and dependable.

One crowd to which Lincoln's relation was particularly interesting was the army. It was something close, personal, quite exceptional. Few leaders in history indeed have been on quite such intimate and friendly terms with their troops as Abraham Lincoln was with the armies of the North during the Civil War. It was as if he knew them, and they him. As a matter of fact, that was the truth. Lincoln had an unusually sympathetic knowledge of the experience and character of the men that responded to the first call for troops. He knew the kind of homes that the vast majority had come from, the way they had lived and worked, the kind of schools and churches to which

they had gone, the feelings that swayed them, what their temptations would be, what would shake their dependability and what would inspire it. He never brought himself to look on the army as a mechanism. It was a mass of living men, for each of whom he felt sympathy and understanding.

In a remarkable way the soldiers themselves early came to sense something of this. They felt that he was like them. They understood him - believed in him. They came to regard him as their friend and defender in this tremendous machine which had gobbled them up. One reason for the sense of acquaintanceship with the President which existed in the minds of soldiers of the Eastern armies was that they saw him often and great numbers of them had actual personal contact with him. This was made possible by so many of them passing through Washington on their way to the front, often bivouacking for weeks in and around the city, coming back into the hospitals after the battles, making the town their rendezvous on their long or short leaves. Concentrated in and around the city they had the opportunity to run across the President often on the almost daily informal excursions that he made to points where soldiers were gathered. Let him stop and talk at a hospital bed with some particularly touching case and the fact not only spread through the ward but out into the army and back into the country. Letter after letter has turned up, story after story has come from boys to whom the President had spoken in the hospital, on the street, in camp, and who had sent word home about it.

One of his pleasantest contacts was with the Company that

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guarded the White House from September 1862 to the end of the war - much against his will at first, it must be said. Company K it was called. This Company came from my own part of the country, Crawford County, Pa., and from my childhood on I met old soldiers who belonged to it and whose great pride was that Mr. Lincoln knew them by name. - "Always called me Joe," I remember one of the members of this Company telling me again and again.

The captain of Company K was a well known citizen of Meadville, Pa., Capt. D. V. Derickson, and his stories of Mr.Lincoln's friendliness not only toward him but all his men, were exhaustless. The President was still at the Soldiers' Home when Company K first went on guard, and he wasted no time in setting up informal relations with their captain. It was Mr. Lincoln's habit to breakfast earlier than the family while living at the Soldiers' Home, and he frequently invited the Captain of the Guard in to breakfast with him. I have often heard Captain Derickson tell in later years of going in and finding Mr. Lincoln reading the Bible. He did not always put the book down when he came in but would begin to read aloud, commenting as he went on.

Mr. Lincoln's friendly interest in the individual members of Company K was genuine and continuous. If he passed when they were at their mess he often asked for a cup of coffee or a plate of pork and beans. Possibly not a little of his friendliness was because Tad loved Company K and its members so well, and because he could depend upon their both amusing and guarding the boy. Mrs.Lincoln, too, favored the Company, sending them all sorts of presents

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and helping them in the sports which they planned to enliven what must have frequently been rather dull days. The members of Company K became a perpetual advertisement of Lincoln and his interest in the common man to the soldierspassing through Washington.

As the war went on there was a need of soldiers to defend the President to soldiers, for before the end of '62 something like a revolt against Lincoln arose in the army, undermining its efficiency and steadily depleting its numbers. The youth of the men and their ignorance of war and what it meant had something to do with this, but also there was the failure of the Army of the Potomac to reach its objective, intensified by a revulsion against the Emancipation Proclamation, the turning of the war from the saving of the Union to the freeing of the negro, as ~~the men~~ many looked at it.

The opposition of the North made the most of the men's discontent in their efforts to discredit Lincoln. They pitied and defended the deserter, they placed the failure of the war on his shoulders, and they did their utmost to sow dissatisfaction with the policies he adopted towards slavery. The result was a falling off in the army which caused Lincoln most serious concern. In July of '62 when McClellan was crying for men for the Peninsula, the President made a careful study of ~~the~~ numbers. He found that 160,000 had gone into the Army of the Potomac, but in July there were but 86,500 present. He thought that 23,500 would cover all the killed, wounded and missing - where were the other 25,00? Could they be found, returned and prevented from going away again? That became the problem.

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And it continued to be the problem. In the Spring of '63 Hooker told the Committee on the Conduct of the War that when he took charge of the army after the Battle of Fredericksburg there were about 200 desertions a day, and that parents, wives, brothers and sisters filled the express trains of the army with packages of citizens' clothing to assist soldiers in escaping.

"At that time," said General Hooker, "perhaps a majority of the officers, especially those high in rank, were hostile to the policy of the government in the conduct of the war. The Emancipation Proclamation had been published a short time before and a large element of the army had taken sides antagonistic to it, declaring that they never would have embarked in the war had they anticipated this action of the government. When rest came to the army, the disaffected, from whatever cause, began to show themselves and make their influence felt in and out of the camps.

"I may also state that at the moment I was placed in command, I caused a return to be made of the absentees of the army, and found the number to be 2,922 commissioned officers, and 81,964 non-commissioned officers and privates. These were scattered all over the country, and the majority were absent from causes unknown."

Nobody, I think, understood the psychology of this stampede better than Lincoln himself. He could - and did - put himself in the place of the boys. He seems never to have forgotten what the officers often forgot - that these men had had no military

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training, knew nothing of discipline, nothing of rank and etiquette. They began indeed with a hearty contempt for the etiquette which forced them to salute some petty officer who had been their companion from boyhood and for whom perhaps they had not the highest opinion as a man. There were those who felt it improper to salute a man to whom they had not been introduced, as more than one put it when hauled up for failing to touch his cap to a superior passing officer. Their untrained, independent, good-as-you attitude was continually getting them into trouble and all it meant, from Lincoln's point of view, was that they, being asked to do things without any preliminary explanation of why they were necessary, naturally rebelled.

Then, there was the physical side. Like many American boys then and now, they were reckless of health, indifferent to exposure and exertions, had not learned how to take care of themselves- the fatigue, the discomfort, the ailments that back home a mother

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would have looked after, went hard with them. It was natural enough that young boys, half sick, discouraged, home sick, should desert. Lincoln could never forget their youth, and consequently never could be severe with them. He knew, too, nobody better, how much natural cowardice there is in men, and was always reluctant to allow a man to be shot for that reason. It was to Judge Holt, the Judge-Advocate of the Army, who brought him a sentence of death to be approved - in the early years of the war the President as Commander-in-Chief was obliged to approve all death sentences - that he said, "If Almighty God gives a man a cowardly pair of legs, how can he help their running away with him?" It was a version of a story which we have a record of his telling as far back as 1839: A witty Irish soldier was always boasting of his bravery when no danger was near, but as regularly retreated at the first sign of an engagement. When his captain took him to task he said: "Captain, I have as brave a heart as Julius Caesar ever had, but somehow or other whenever danger approaches my cowardly legs will run away with it." This story was a guide and explanation to Lincoln in the war as it had been 20 years before in Illinois politics.

The longer the war lasted the more necessary it became from the point of view of the military establishment that the death penalty be enforced promptly and generally. It was a terrible trial for Lincoln. He no longer had to approve these sentences, but he still had the power of pardon and suspension, and his free use of it brought severest criticism upon him from his Secretary of War, from Congress and from the Generals. And yet he would, and did, persist. If anyone will take the trouble to go over the record of military

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telegrams in these years, he cannot but be amazed at the number of telegrams that Lincoln sent suspending sentence. And not one telegram to a case, by any means, but two ,three, even four, following them up lest there should have been some miscarriage, insisting often that the person to whom they were sent let him know whether they had been received and his order carried out.

One of the most interesting documentary studies that has ever been made of his intervention and clemency was by Leslie J. Perry, for many years a member of the government commission which prepared the Civil War records for publication. Perry's particular task was compiling everything relating to prisoners of war, and he especially studied Lincoln's endorsements on papers presented in the interest of prisoners. He found them to be not only sympathetic but as a rule what you may call canny. Knowing, as he did, how many tricks there are to save the really guilty, the president brought into his endorsement, as a rule, the powerful person that had brought the plea to him, in a way putting it up to him to justify the decision - as when Governor Johnson of Tennessee forwarded the petition of a committee of citizens of Nashville for a pardon,without committing himself, Lincoln wrote on the paper -

> "If Governor Johnson will say in writing on this sheet that in his opinion this man should be discharged, I will discharge him. A. Lincoln."

Johnson said it, and the man was discharged.

Every now and then in these endorsements there is a touch of humor, as on the papers of a man who had made a personal appeal, declaring that he never was, and never could be, a secessionist; "But,

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I have", he said, "been of a highly nervous temperament, with weak lungs and easily excited. I was shamefully deceived by a supposed friend who made me believe that I would be killed unless I fled my home and native state to seek safety in the South, etc. etc."
"This man being so well vouched, "Lincoln wrote on the paper, "and talking so much better than I have ever heard, let him take the oath of December 8 and be discharged."

Very many of his orders had behind them stories of tragic anxiety. Here is the case of Henry M. Luckett, an old enfeebled man, a Methodist minister, who lived in Missouri when the war broke out. Everything that he had was at once swept away fmmm him. Overwhelmed by what had happened, his mind half shattered, he sought refuge in Memphis, where his bitterness against what he felt was the injustice of his losses was expressed in violent criticism of the war and particularly of its Northern leaders. Finally some violently loyal person accused him of being a spy and a trap was set for him. He was persuaded that friends whom he knew in the South were in urgent need of quinine, percussion caps, etc., and that if he could establish a trade through the lines he would repair his fortunes. The old man fell a victim, procured a wagon and supplies and was immediately arrested and condemned to be shot. His daughter, a Kentuckian, almost dead of terror, sought her Congressman, Daniel Voorhees, reaching him only 48 hours before the sentence was to be executed. It took time to bring together a few powerful personages and to reach Mr. Lincoln, but it was done. The case was presented by

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one of the group, but, as Mr. Veorhees says in telling the story, Lincoln's mind was far away, he scarcely heard what was being said to him. It was then that Mrs. Bullitt stepped forward.

At her first word his whole face changed and he began to listen intently. Suddenly he said, "What did you say this man's name was?" "Luckett," they answered.

"Henry M. Luckett?" the President asked quickly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bullitt, "my father's name is Henry M. Luckett."

"Why, he preached in Springfield years ago," said Mr. Lincoln. "This is wonderful! I know this man well. I have heard him preach. He was a tall angular man like I am, and I was mistaken for him on the streets. Did you say he was to be shot the day after tomorrow? No. No. There will be no shooting nor hanging in his case."

And there was not, for among the discharges that Mr. Perry has unearthed is this:

"December 17, 1863.

"Major-General Hurlburt, Memphis, Tenn:

> "I understand you have under sentence of death a tall old man by the name of Henry M. Luckett. I personally knew him and did not think him a bad man. Please do not let him be executed, unless upon further order from me, and in the meantime send me a transcript of the record. A. Lincoln."

The last thing that the little party heard as they filed out was the President saying to himself: "Henry M. Luckett! No - No- there is no shooting or hanging in this case."

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Members of Congress were of course the ones in position to bring the most direct pressure for pardons upon the President. They used their relation freely. They learned that there were certain appeals almost sure to sway him. There was the appeal of youth. As he said once in a telegram to General Meade, suspending a sentence: "I am unwilling for any boy under 18 to be shot." And when it could be proved that the boy was as young as 18, nobody rejoiced more than Lincoln. There were cases in which he probably was deceived, but as the war went on he took more and more care not to be deceived, to insist on having proper evidence.

Then there were the insane and weak-minded. Numbers of poor chaps of known weak minds enlisted and were accepted; after the draft came in force, it was no infrequent thing for the unscrupulous substitute hunter secretly to manoeuvre into his place a weak-minded boy. There were the inevitable results - crime, desertion, with death penalty. Where the mental condition could be shown to have been disordered, the President was firm in his refusal to allow an execution.

There was a humorous side to some of his pardons. Every now and then somebody who had been very harsh with him for his clemency would have a case of his own. There was his Attorney-General Bates, who had been especially severe on the President because he used his pardoning power so freely. The lack of sternness was a marked defect of Lincoln's character, he insisted. But one day Bates wanted a pardon.

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"I want you to give me a prisoner," he said to the President. It was the son of one of his old friends who had been captured across the Potomac. He knew the boy's father to be a Unionist at heart, and believed that if the boy could be paroled and sent home under promise of not returning to the army, it would be a wise as well as a kind act. Lincoln jumped at the suggestion. He had a case of the same kind - he told the Attorney-General - the son of an old Illinois friend had run away and joined the Confederates. He was a prisoner of war and his father, heart-broken, was begging to have him sent home. "If you and I, Bates" he said, "will unite our influence with this Administration, I believe we can manage it together to make two loyal fathers happy. Let us make the boys our prisoners." And they did so.

General Butler who had been most harsh with Lincoln's clemency, even telegraphing him once: "You will destroy all discipline among our soldiers" - finally had his turn. He had thought better of an order for execution, but did not want to appear himself as having changed his mind, so he hurried to the President and laid the record before him. "You, Butler," the President exclaimed, "asking me to pardon some poor fellow? Give me that pen." And the pardon was made.

Lincoln's known tenderness towards soldiers resulted naturally in his seeing much of women interested in particular cases. He was greatly impressed by the efficiency of women in the war, and

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rightly so for the great sanitary commission which they built up was one of the finest pieces of executive work which the women of this country have ever done. Their devotion and courage as nurses was his constant admiration. A woman could nearly always depend on securing an interview with the President if she had any kind of a case and he was always gentle and chivalrous with them. As a matter of fact, Lincoln had in his nature a fine strain of gallantry towards women which only his situation and circumstances obscured, but which nevertheless every now and then broke through. C. M. Cole, a former Senator from California, now in his 101st year, one of the few remaining men who actually knew Lincoln in war times, tells how one day at a state reception Mrs. Cole lost one of her gloves, and the President hearing her mention it, said: "Never mind, Mrs. Cole, I will have the servants look for it after the guests are gone, and if they find it I will keep it for a souvenir."

Frank Carpenter tells a similar story. He had friends in his White House studio one day to see the canvas at which he was working, and the President dropped in while they were there, greeting them hospitably. The lady carried a bunch of flowers. "Allow me, Mr. President," she said, "to present you with a bouquet." "If you give them to me, Madam," Mr. Lincoln replied, "and they are mine, I think I cannot possibly make so good a use of them as to present them to you." Chesterfield could not have done better, Carpenter comments.

This gallantry towards women as well as his deep sympathy for their sorrows made him particularly open to their pleas.

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Many stories have come to me in manuscript in the years that I have been working on Lincoln's life which illustrate this. Here is one, so far as I know, never before printed, sent me many years ago by A. D. Yokum, then of Pasadena, California, whose mother was its heroine.

"In August 1864 I was seriously wounded in action in front of Richmond and sent to the hospital at Fortress Monroe, Va. where my condition was soon regarded as hopeless. I was but a boy and when consciousness grew dim I called persistently for my mother, hundreds of miles away in Ohio. My surgeon gathered up as best he could my distracted and disjointed exclamations, and from them learned her whereabouts and telegraphed her. She at the time was attending the Ohio Yearly Meeting of 'Friends' at Mt. Pleasant, Ohio, fifty miles away from her home.

"When the call reached her, a petition was dictated by the Meeting to the Hon. Edwin M. Staunton, Secretary of War, asking that 'Jane Yocum' and son be permitted to go to Fortress Monroe in obedience to the summons attached. This petition bore the names of one thousand Quakers present at that meeting.

"Upon their arrival in Washington, the War Office was visited and Secretary Staunton was interviewed. He was greatly moved by my mother's story, and in deepest sympathy evinced his feelings. 'However', said he, 'I cannot grant your request." Were I to vary the rule adopted for the exclusion of civilians from Fortress Monroe, we would soon be so overrun with distracted mothers, wives and sweethearts there, we should have no room for our sick and wounded soldiers! No persuasion or appeal could avail and so they were forced to retire.

"My brother advised a speedy return home. 'No' said my mother, 'I must reach him and I am yet confident I shall. I will go to the President and if I can see him, I will certainly succeed.'

"Arriving at the White House, they found two lines of surging humanity from the door to the street, impatiently awaiting their turn. Vainly my mother pleaded for a place near the door. Said they, 'No, we have spent days to get our places. Go do likewise.'

"My mother then sought the rear of the mansion and to a negro woman who answered her unusual call, asked if she

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"might see Mrs. Lincoln, who at length received her. With streaming eyes the story was told; the result of the interview at the War Office; her despair in not being able to reach the President in the recognized way. 'Yet,' said my mother, I believe if I could see the President and tell him my story that I have 'four' sons in the War, and that this one is dying, he would let me go.' 'I believe so, too,' said Mrs. Lincoln, 'and you shall see him. Come with me.' They went to an unoccupied room, where after a short delay, Mrs. Lincoln came leading by the arm that greatest and best living man.

"The story was soon told and from her traveling bag she handed him the massive Petition. He read the heading only and handed it back to her. 'You must see Secretary Staunton.' He was told that the Secretary had been seen and refused to give the permit. The President immediately dashed off a note. 'This will send you to Fortress Monroe and bring you back. Don't censure Staunton. He is the real rock of the Government. I am the weakling. Now, farewell, and may you arrive in time to save your son and my boy soldier."

"Quickly they hastened to the War Office and soon got audience with the Secretary, to whom she explained all she had done and handed him the note given her by the President. 'I am glad for you' said Staunton with a smile, 'He can do this, while I dare not, for reasons you already know.'"

It is good to know that she did reach Ft. Monroe and that her son did recover.

Not all of his intercourse with women, however, was on this level. Every now and them some one came along that tried to deceive or trap him, or to play selfishly on his emotions. Senator Brandegee of Connecticut used to tell an amusing story of his encounter with the young wife of an old Colonel who was among his constituents. The Colonel had a before-the-war claim against the Government with which he was not making much headway, when his wife took a hand. Trusting to her power to sway the President, she sought a personal interview "on important business."

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The lady was tall, statuesque and beautiful. Ushered into Mr. Lincoln's office, she rushed across the room, fell upon her knees, caught him around the legs and began in impassioned manner to urge her claim. "When," said Mr. Lincoln telling the story to a Connecticut representative, "the door suddenly opened, and who do you think entered but Mary Lincoln. And a pretty mess we had of it." Mrs. Lincoln ordered the kneeling supplicant out of the house and instructed the servants never to admit "that woman" to the White House again. "And now," said Mr. Lincoln, "tell your colleague to get that long-legged woman back to Connecticut, or never expect to ask of me a favor again."

Such incidents are rare in the great grist that have come down to us. Mr. Lincoln's relations with women in the war were such as to enlarge and elevate all his natural regard and sympathy for them.

There was no question that out of Lincoln's clemency to soldiers he derived one of his rare consolations. There are stories of his having said more than once when he had signed a pardon or a suspension of sentence, "I can go to sleep now for I know that there is an old father and mother that will be happy tonight." If the awful business of "butchering boys" as he called it, gave him a heartache that never ended - he seems never to have been able to forget that it was going on - he did get equally moments of relief and happiness in knowing that he had restored a son to his mother, a husband to his wife, a father to his children.

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And yet there was nobody that could be more unbending, even harsh, with calculated crime, meanness, wickedness of soldiers as well as civilians. Among the pardons that were sought during the war was one of a former slave trader. A big petition was made up in the district from which he came, praying the President to release the man, and the congressman from that district presented it. The President read the letter and the petition and turning to the congressman said, "I believe I am kindly enough in nature and can be moved to pity and to pardon the perpetrator of almost the worst crime that the mind of man can conceive or the arm of man can execute; but any man who for paltry gain and stimulated only by avarice can rob Africa of her children to sell into interminable bondage I never will pardon, and he may stay and rot in jail before he will get relief from me," - a comment not unlike that he made once to Governor Curtin of Pennsylvania in discussing the orgy of gambling in gold which went on in the war. "Those fellows in Wall Street are a set of sharks," he said, bringing his clinched fist down with a bang. "I wish every one of them had his devilish head shot off."

[redacted]

The crown of Lincoln's relations to the soldiers was that they understood him. The popular name the army gave him - "Father Abraham" - came from their sense that the man stood as a

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father, felt as a father towards them. A mysterious something carried over that idea to them, and many of them ~~carried~~ held it to their graves. ~~It was a sense of the universality of his sympathy.~~ I quoted Whitman's remarkable phrase at the end of the last chapter - "Lincoln carried a pass key to hearts." ~~And that~~ Lincoln" pass key was that every man felt in him something akin to himself. As Whitman puts it -

> Then the mechanics take him for a mechanic,
> And the soldiers suppose him to be a soldier, and the sailors that he has follow'd the sea,
> And the authors take him for an author, and the artists for an artist,
> And the laborers perceive he could labor with them and love them,
> No matter what the work is, that he is the one to follow it or has follow'd it,
> No matter what the nation, that he might find his brothers and sisters there.
>
> The English believe he comes of their English stock,
> A Jew to the Jew he seems, a Russ to the Russ, usual and near, removed from none.

In our next chapter we shall take up the efforts to prevent the re-nomination of Lincoln.

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I. LUSTRATIONS
for
CHAPTER XLV

1) Lincoln in Camp.
Whenever opportunity offered, Mr. Lincoln made the rounds of the camp streets, shaking hands with the "boys" and taking note of their housekeeping.
From a drawing by W. R. Leigh, by courtesy of Macmillan Co.

2) Among the convalescents who rose to salute him on one of his frequent visits to Washington hospitals, there was a Pennsylvanian who stood 6 ft. 7 in. in his stockings - Lincoln was 6 ft. 4 in. The President looked at him in amazement and finally said, "Hello, Comrade, do you know when your feet get cold?"
From a drawing by W. R. Leigh, by courtesy of Macmillan Co.

3) Heroic bust of Lincoln. Sculptured in marble by Gutzon Borglum. Finished December 1908. Purchased by Mr Eugene Meyer, Jr., of New York, and presented to the United States Government. Now in the Capitol at Washington.

4) Fac-simile of note to the Secretary of War, given to a young soldier who had slipped into the White House and told his story to Lincoln.

(p.251, Vol. II, Tarbell's Life of Lincoln.")

5) "What am I that Thou shouldst ask this of me"
From a painting by Blendon Campbell, made to illustrate "Father Abraham" by Ida M. Tarbell. Courtesy of Macmillan Co.

(Miss Marshall: See illustration opposite page 24 of Father Abraham)

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